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ABSTRACT

Three flaws found in commercial reading materials, such as workbooks and kits, are discussed in this paper, and examples of the flaws are taken from specific materials. The first problem noted is that illustrations frequently provide the information that the learner is supposed to supply through phonetic or structural analysis; the illustrations may be deterrents rather than aids. The second flaw noted is that skills are not always introduced sequentially. The third problem discussed is that material does not always do what it purports to do; for example, a phonetic exercise may actually test vocabulary. The author also summarizes ten flaws which he has written about in another paper; these are primarily concerned with the questioning techniques used to check reading comprehension. (MKM)

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Flaws in Commercial Reading Materials

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In a previous article (Axelrod, 1974), this teacher listed ten flaws commonly found in commercial reading materials. In summary they were:

1. Many questions are composed in such a way that the student need not read the selection in order to answer them.
2. Students need only read parts of the selection to correctly answer questions asked.
3. Students cannot be assured of understanding the question correctly in the interest of obtaining a correct answer because of ambiguity.
4. Many times the student cannot obtain enough information from the reading of the selection to answer questions asked.
5. Questions are culturally-loaded and not answerable by students without particular cultural frames of reference.
6. In multiple choice questions, incorrect choices may be obviously wrong, making choice of correct answer inevitable.
7. Often the choice of answers is too limited to demonstrate knowledge of the material.
8. More than one answer may be correct but not recognized so by the author.
9. The grammatical structure of the sentence with a cloze question may literally give the answer away.
10. Some materials merely test, instead of teach. (summarized by A. Tiberia, Reading Abstracts).

This article will list three additional flaws found in reading workbooks, kits, etc., and give examples drawn from specific materials.

1. Pictures are still crutches to learning. Illustrations and pictures are deterrents, not aids,

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to reading comprehension. Their use undermines the need for some children (so they might feel) to read the accompanying story before answering the multiple-choice questions. In one phonics workbook (Halvorsen and others, 1966), for example, the student is asked to complete the sentence with a word that rhymes with the underlined word: "Mother will bake a pretty ____." Instead of his having to rely on his phonics knowledge in order to come up with the word "cake," there is a picture of a cake next to the sentence. The student, thus does not have to "figure out" the answer or know how to rhyme words. All he has to do is write the name of the picture next to the sentence. In another reading exercise (Krane, 1970) in which the short "a" is supposedly being tested, one sentence says, "Sam can pass the ____.8 The choice of words the pupil must use to select his one right answer is "tack," "jam," and "mat." Next to these words is a picture of a bottle of jam with, believe it or not, the word "jam" written across the jar. If the student writes "jam" as his answer, does that indicate he has mastered the short "a" sound? Hardly; it indicates that he can "read" the picture and copy what it says on it. Finally, in one linguistic skillsbook (Fries and others, 1966) this sentence appears:

Dan bats and _____.
taps the fan.
tags the bag.
pats Nat.

Next to the sentence is an illustration of a boy running across first base in a baseball game. In order to arrive at the correct answer, the child did not

have to read the accompanying passage-dependent story first or at all.

The direction for writers and teachers is clear: do not use pictures when teaching reading skills. Do not use materials which contain pictures that "aid" children to read. Although their inclusion in commercial materials is based on the assumption (true or false) that children like pictures and that illustrations "liven up" an all-print page, their use is unjustified so long as they obviate the need for children both to read and rely on their own resources to understand and get answers correct.

If publishers feel the need to use pictures to appeal to children and to their teachers who buy them, the illustrations should be made irrelevant to the contents of the reading exercise in order to offset the "crutch" effect. One example might be to have a cartoon of a boy or girl "introducing" a page to its readers. In this way necessary clues are not being given away. The writer, however, must be sure not to have the illustration "throw off" or confuse the student in his understanding of the material. An illustration of a clown would not be used to introduce the readers to an exercise on astronomy.

2. The commercial material teaches skills either unnecessarily or out of order.

It would be foolish to teach a pupil reading on an eighth grade level to know how to identify the differences between digraphs and diphthongs. He does not need to know because he has gone beyond that in

his reading. One does not reteach a skill the learner has already mastered or teach a skill the learner does not need to know. Yet many publishers of reading materials continue to commit these crimes. Take the case of configuration clues. As Singer (1970) points out, "...configuration as a primary cue for word recognition (is) used for teaching beginning readers how to read." (italics his) A person reading on a third reading level would not need to learn to use configuration clues (whether he has mastered them or not) since he is beyond being a beginning reader. Yet an error in this area is precisely what one SRA kit (David, 1961) makes in doing the following:

Young Nathan Hale gave his ____ for his country. This sentence, identified by SRA as written on a 3.0 level, asks the pupil to put the correct word in the configuration boxes. The student, thus, has to demonstrate his use of a skill he already knows or does not need to know. Why does he not need to demonstrate his mastery? Because configuration is a beginning reading skill and not one to be tested or taught if the pupil is reading as high as a third reading level. Configuration is being tested or taught unnecessarily and out of the order in which it is supposed to be taught. Teaching this skill on preprimer and primer materials is a better idea.

There are two morals here. First, reading skills should be taught in logical step order - no cart before the horse. Second, pupils should not learn what they already know - no reinventing the wheel.

3. The material does not do what it purports to do. Laudably, commercial reading materials rarely do nothing. But many of them do not do what they claim to do. One vocabulary exercise (Helmkamp and Thomas, 1966) in phonics' clothing asks the pupil, for example, to think of a four letter word containing the long "a" sound that means, "The postman brings it." The authors be believe that if the child can answer this and the similar accompanying items that he has mastered that vowel sound. This assumption is false. If the student can do the exercise, it probably indicates that he has a good vocabulary. It does not test if has good "sound sense" - the pupil might still not know that the "a" in "mail" is long. Vocabulary, yes; phonics, no.

Publishers and their writers should "tighten up" their materials, making sure that when they claim to teach or test smmething that they do just that, nothing more and nothing instead.

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